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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 SKOPJE 000892

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E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: MACEDONIA: CALM AFTER THE STORM -- POLICE
OPERATION IN BRODEC CONCLUDES

REF: SKOPJE 887

SUMMARY

¶1. (SBU) A major police action against a group of ethnic Albanian criminals in a village in northwest Macedonia (reftel) concluded November 8, with six criminals killed and more than a dozen arrested. The operation appeared to have been conducted properly, with mixed ethnic patrols conducting the raid. The police discovered a large cache of ammunition, explosives, and weapons allegedly smuggled into the area by the group. Ethnic Albanian reaction to the operation has been mixed. Governing coalition partner DPA has been supportive of the operation, while opposition DUI has been sharply critical of scope of the operation, accusing the police of using heavy-handed tactics and the MOI of refusing to release bodies of those killed for prompt burial. Based on evidence available to date, it appears the GOM succeeded in an operation to enforce rule of law against a group of fugitive criminals, although the operation caused some collateral damage in the village and some villagers appear to be distraught over the large-scale action. End summary.

POLICE ACTION WRAPS UP IN BRODEC

¶2. (SBU) The major police action that began November 7 against a criminal group in the northwest village of Brodec near the Kosovo border (reftel) had concluded by November 8. According to an OSCE report, the police confirmed six criminals were killed in gunfire battles with police (one unconfirmed report suggested Kosovar fugitive and suspected terrorist Ramadan Shiti had blown himself up with a hand grenade to avoid capture), and as many as fourteen members of the group were captured. The MOI did not report any civilian casualties, although ethnic Albanian media reported 11 civilians were wounded and taken to a hospital in Skopje. One police officer involved in the raid suffered light shrapnel wounds, according to an MOI account. The MOI reported that action still was underway in Kosovo to locate and arrest one of the members of the group.

OPERATION APPEARS TO HAVE BEEN PROPERLY CONDUCTED

¶3. (SBU) Following a visit to Brodec on November 8, our ICITAP adviser and an OSCE police adviser concluded that the operation appeared to have been professionally handled, with

mixed ethnic police units conducting the initial raid on the criminal hideout outside of Brodec, and the ensuing house-to-house search after members of that group fled into the village. There was no apparent evidence of significant collateral damage, although some houses were pockmarked by gunfire and at least one door had been heavily damaged as police entered a residence. It appeared that members of the group used the local mosque for shelter and cover; a large number of expended ammunition cartridges suggested there had been a heavy firefight in that area.

14. (SBU) Some of the residents interviewed by our ICITAP adviser said they believed the police had conducted themselves professionally, while others said the police had been heavy-handed. During the interviews, the ICITAP adviser observed some unidentified individuals who appeared to be attempting to intimidate villagers who were talking to him.

LARGE WEAPONS AND AMMO CACHE DISPLAYED, INVESTIGATORS ON SITE

15. (SBU) Our ICITAP and OSCE colleagues inspected at the site a large display of weapons -- including heavy machine guns, grenade launchers, and at least one mortar which police claim were confiscated from the group. They also observed the police securing the area, and an investigative judge, public prosecutor, and forensics team conducting an investigation at the site. The MOI has announced it will display the weapons at a military barracks in Skopje and will allow foreign "police attaches" to inspect the cache.

ENFORCING THE LAW THROUGHOUT MACEDONIA

16. (SBU) PM Gruevski, in a statement during a joint press conference November 8 with visiting USNATO Ambassador Nuland,

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said the operation reflected the "enforcement of the law throughout the entire territory of Macedonia," adding that the operation had been professionally planned and executed. The EUSR office issued a statement the same day, noting that -- according to information received from the MOI -- the operation had been conducted professionally and had not resulted in civilian casualties. The EUSR statement also noted the good cooperation between Macedonian and Kosovo authorities during the operation.

ETHNIC ALBANIAN PARTIES REACT -- DPA POSITIVE...

17. (SBU) Ethnic Albanian governing coalition partner DPA supported the government operation, with DPA President Thaci telling us November 9 that it was professionally conducted. He said it was the first time the police had undertaken an action of such scope with such little collateral damage and so few mishaps or mistakes. He claimed there had been no civilian casualties, and that the police had behaved appropriately.

18. (SBU) Thaci said it would be important for ethnic Albanians to recognize that the police could conduct such raids with precision, and without treating everyone in the village as a potential criminal. He expected the GOM to pay for the collateral damage caused, including civilian vehicles damaged or destroyed by MOI armored personnel carriers and burned homes.

...DUI REMARKS ARE STILL CRITICAL, BUT MORE RESTRAINED

19. (SBU) Initial DUI comments in the press harshly criticized the operation, claiming the police had used disproportionate force and had "committed violence against the Albanian civilian population." DUI also called on the international community to apply pressure on the MOI to halt the operation, a request which was roundly rejected. Later DUI comments were more restrained, although still critical. DUI President Ali Ahmeti distanced his party from the criminal group, but said the police had used excessive force in the operation.

DUI VP Arifi criticized the GOM for refusing to release the bodies of two Brodec residents killed in the raid (she alleged that one of them was 16 years old) so they could be buried. NOTE: The bodies of those killed in the raid have been turned over to the Forensics Unit for examination and should be returned to the families after that process is concluded. END NOTE.

¶10. (SBU) Arifi told us November 9 that she had met with Brodec residents who were "distraught and traumatized," and who "distrust the police forces." Although she said she agreed with the IC position that the operation had been necessary and conducted professionally, she also said there was a "growing disgust among the residents of Brodec, who believed the police had used excessive force" in the operation. She said villagers also had told DUI officials that the 13 persons arrested in the sweep were not members of the criminal group, but were in fact residents who had been taken from their homes.

COMMENT -- ENFORCING RULE OF LAW

¶11. (SBU) Based on reports to date, we believe the operation in Brodec was conducted professionally and effectively, a successful GOM operation to enforce rule of law in a "former conflict area." We do not doubt that there might have been flaws in planning and execution, or that some villagers were upset over the disruption and damage caused by the raid and ensuing firefights. At the end of the day, however, this was not an operation that pitted eMacedonians against eAlbanians, as evidenced by the use of mixed ethnic patrols. The targets of the operation were known criminals and fugitives from justice, including escapees from a prison in Kosovo for whom international arrest warrants had been issued. As the dust settles, we will learn more details about the operation and clarify some questions, including whether there were in fact civilian casualties, as claimed by some media. We will also press the GOM to take quick measures to repair the collateral damage, and encourage the government to work with local political leaders on confidence building steps that could

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enhance respect for the police.
MILOVANOVIC